

Abstract

This article examines the U.S. Forest Service administrative response to the growth and diversification of recreation. It observes that recreation's ecological and economic impacts have changed dramatically, and provides an overview of the new political landscape created by the professionalization and political organization of the recreation industry and its interest groups. It concludes that Forest Service recreation administration remains informal and variable by district. The agency response to changing recreation is constrained by budget, pulled by shifting alliances among interest groups, and driven by norms.

Administering Fun:

U.S. Forest Service Response to the Growth and Diversification of Recreation

This article examines the Forest Service's administrative response to recreation's



Figure 1: Incidental Timber Sale, Jackson Hole Mountain Resort (photo by Ann Brower)

shifting role in the multiple use paradigm -- from incidental benefit to dominant use, and from contemplative activity to extreme sport. Figure 1 depicts one of two incidental timber sales, of 40 trees, on the Bridger Teton National Forest in 2002. The sale was “incidental” because it was engineered to allow the Jackson

Hole Mountain Resort ski area a half-pipe for extreme snowboarders, not to produce board-feet. While recreation used a side benefit of timber sales in National Forests (jfor cites); in 2002, the Bridger Teton sold timber as an incidental benefit to recreation development and highway construction.



Figure 2: ESPN X-Games Snowboard SuperPipe in Aspen, CO, White River National Forest (©Kohlman / EXPN.com)

build to be only

This article analyzes recreation as a dualistic administrative task, consisting of *provision* of recreation opportunities and *management* of recreation impacts (Brower in review). Using this analytical framework, it examines recreation administration in three Western national forests, looking at forest plans, outfitter guide permit administration, and regulatory enforcement patterns on motorized recreation.

The research began with the hypothesis that the Forest Service would respond to the growth and diversification by shifting its administrative emphasis from providing recreation to managing it. This shift is found to be nascent, but has not taken hold. Whereas recreation has grown, diversified, and organized, Forest Service administration remains decentralized, informal, and variable by district.

Analytical Framework: Recreation Provision vs. Recreation Management

Recreation is a dualistic organizational task, consisting of providing opportunities and managing the people who use them. The Forest Service provides recreation opportunities in the form of roads, trails, campgrounds, and ski resorts; and thus invites the public into the agency's domain. After the Forest Service creates recreation opportunities, the recreating public uses National Forests to create its own outdoor experiences, as well as social and ecological impacts.

The Forest Service played no part in inventing mountain bikes, snowboards, snowmobiles, or off-road vehicles. Yet these new technologies, the people who use them, and the political and economic implications of their use exert pressures on the Forest Service. In short, the Forest Service is faced with *providing* for new activities and simultaneously *managing* a new landscape of recreational impacts. To an organization, provision of a good and management of its impacts are very different tasks. In recreation, the Forest Service must balance between the two. In so doing, the

agency balances between competing interest groups, historical cultural biases in the agency, and constant budgetary constraints.

The Growth and Diversification of Recreation

Outdoor forest recreation has diversified from contemplative to Extreme™ (cites). Recreation advocacy groups have gone from a pro-wilderness monolith (jfor cites) to a collection of diverse and well-organized interests, each lobbying for something different (cite). Recreation provision has grown from a net sink Forest Service budgets to which other program areas must contribute (cite), to a legitimate source of Congressional appropriations (cite). While for decades it was perceived by many as ecologically benign relative to timber (jfor cites), now many researchers, managers, and observers recognize recreation's significant social and ecological impacts (jfor cites). Once considered economically insignificant, a preservation use of public land (jfor cites), it is now a commodity in its own rite with significant contributions to regional economies (cite). Beyond recognition of recreation as a commodity, many scholars and managers now view it as the dominant commodity on public lands (Laitos and Carr 1999).

Recreation has grown in six significant ways: sheer numbers of recreation visitors, (Cordell and McKinney 1999) ecological impacts, (Hammit and Cole 1998) economic importance, (Walsh 1986) importance in the Forest Service budget, (Clarke and Wildavsky 1973) and political organization (Brower in review). Likewise, both recreational activities and recreation-oriented interest groups have diversified (Brower in review). Technological advances and human ingenuity, competitiveness, and desire for challenge in the outdoors have spawned the diversification. As such, recreation activities have become more extreme (McAvoy and Dustin 1981; Chavez 2000) and

more high-adventure. (Wagar 1954; McAvoy and Dustin 1981; Greeley and Neff 1968; USDA Forest Service Northeastern Forest Experiment Station 1998; Ewert 1987)

Patterns of use and ecological impact have become both more concentrated and more pervasive at the same time. Firstly, recreationists are more concentrated now in the “front-country” (developed recreation sites close to roads and parking lots) (cite). Secondly, although backcountry visitation numbers have declined, (Lucas and Stankey 1989) technological advances have allowed the still extant backcountry visitors to travel further into the backcountry on foot, mountain bike, or motorized vehicle. As such,

The rocky relationship between recreation and preservation

Discourse analysis of 50 years of the Journal of Forestry reveals that recreation has always been key in political debates over land use in National Forests. (Brower 2004) Politically, over the course of half a century, recreation has been used as a tool to justify both resource extraction and land preservation (Brower in review). In the 1950s and '60s, preservationists claimed the banner of recreation in order to advocate for land preservation (read timber exclusion) in the form of parks and wilderness areas (jfor cites). Of the five forestland uses in the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act (MUSYA) of 1960, preservationists effectively appropriated recreation as their own (jfor cites). Further, they made recreation an exclusive use, incompatible with timber harvesting. In the Journal, foresters chronicled the preservationists making use of the recreation boom of the 1950s to pursue their own ends of preserving land and ultimately excluding timber (jfor cites).

The profession of forestry responded to the preservationists' cooptation of recreation by embracing recreation to promote timber (jfor cites). How can demand for forest recreation justify cutting down trees? Foresters countered preservationists'

advances by arguing that timber extraction benefits recreation (jfor cites), that a managed forest better serves recreation demand than an unmanaged old-growth forest (jfor cites). Over the course of almost 30 years, foresters use recreation to justify timber harvests (cites), road construction (cites), dam construction (cites), and below-cost timber sales (cites).

At the beginning of the 21st century, recreation stands alone as an orphaned interest, abandoned by preservation and forestry alike (cites), and mountain bikers are the new swing voters (cites) in the debates over forest land use. Increasing recreation conflict and ecological impacts have contributed to a dissolution of the recreation-preservation alliance (Brower in review). Recreation spent decades as a political stand-in for timber and preservation, but now the resource debate has changed. Instead of debating timber vs. preservation, with both sides claiming recreation as an ally, the debate bounces between developed and motorized recreation vs. primitive recreation and preservation, with both sides claiming mountain bikers as allies (cites, Economist 2006).

In short, the growth and diversification of recreation have created a complicated web of interests and perceived rights within public land politics. This political landscape within which the Forest Service must operate is much more complex than the traditional landscape of preservation versus extraction.

Forest Service Administrative Response

So where does this leave the Forest Service? Examination of three recreation programs (planning, outfitter permit administration, and enforcement of motorized recreation) in three Western forests (White River, Bridger Teton, and San Bernardino) reveals that while recreation has grown, diversified, organized, professionalized, and

formalized, Forest Service administration remains informal, decentralized, and inconsistent.

Planning

Analysis of first and second-generation NFMA plans reveals that the plans recognize ecological and social impacts of recreation, but exhibit an inconsistent and incomplete shift from provision to management. The first generation plans emphasize provision, often using provision as a management tool to address ecological impacts and conflict (cites; Brower 2004). The older plans use provision to disperse recreationists, and dilute their ecological and social impacts, mimicking the old adage "the solution to pollution is dilution." The urban San Bernardino National Forest introduced the concept of qualified provision (cite), implying that recreation is a limited resource and that too much recreation can have "unacceptable" impacts on the ecosystem and on the quality of the recreation experience (cite).

In 1999, the White River revised its forest plan in the midst of the lynx listing debate, and in the wake of the still unsolved arson of the Vail ski resort expansion into newly established lynx habitat (Glick 2001). The White River had never produced much timber, and the 1999 plan moved further from resource extraction activities (Best 1999a, b). The 1999 draft plan balanced between the former allies, recreation and preservation. At the time, the preservation interest was long established, well organized, and wealthy, while the recreation interest was just starting to come into its own (cites).

In balancing between recreation and preservation, the White River chose preservation (cite), and its new ally, the endangered lynx (Glick 2001). This choice rallied the recreation interest. The newly organized recreation interest, with a little help

from its new-found friends in Congress, pulled the White River back from a preservation and recreation management focused 1999 draft, to a final plan focused strongly on recreation provision in 2002 (cites; Brower 2004). Table 1 depicts the agency's path in forest planning from recreation provision, to management, and back to qualified provision.

Table 1: Provision Versus Management in First and Second Generation Plans

Provision —————>	Qualified Provision —————>	Management
White River 1984		
	San Bernardino 1988	
	Bridger Teton 1990	
		White River 1999
	White River 2002	

Outfitter guide permit administration

Outfitters are professional guides who lead groups into Forests and parks to hunt, fish, backcountry ski, take a week-long trip on horseback, and the like. Each outfitting business holds a special use permit from the Forest Service, which allows the business to guide a certain number of clients per season to a certain area of the Forest to pursue specified activities. Examination of outfitting focused on the administrative tension between outfitters as agency partners vs. regulated entities by looking at rule enforcement on outfitters, user day allocation procedures, allocation of new permits, and application of NEPA to outfitter permits. The changing political economy of the outfitting industry has contributed to a broad scale formalization of the industry, exhibited in the professionalization of outfitters and the increasing political organization of the industry (Brower in review). But regulation of the industry has remained informal, with much variation between Districts and between Forests (cites).

Review of agency rules on outfitters and interviews with outfitters and agency

staff point to outfitter permit administration as a collateral duty of many responsible agency staff. Thus there is variable rule enforcement on individual outfitter businesses (cites). Likewise, allocation of user days can be informal and on-demand (cites). It can be for prospective outfitters to obtain a new permit because the agency aims to protect existing outfitters by not saturating the market (cites), and because administrators are often too busy to attend to this incidental duty (cites). Similarly to the informality of user day allocations, agency application of NEPA to outfitter permit renewals varies by district. For example, until a recent legal settlement, the outfitter permit allocation in Teton Division of the Bridger Teton National Forest held a categorical exclusion to NEPA, meaning that permit renewals and expansions were not subject to NEPA's environmental assessment requirements in this District. By contrast, other districts and other forests routinely apply NEPA to outfitter permit allocation and expansion (cites).

Regulatory Enforcement on Motorized Recreation

Research on motorized recreation enforcement patterns reveals the Forest Service to be constrained by budget, but driven by norms. Historically and culturally, the agency tends to favor primitive recreation opportunities over developed, hence favoring a less interventionist enforcement style over a legalistic, ticket-writing, style (cites). Vast landholdings, multiple entrypoints, and limited enforcement budgets are just a few of the limits on the effectiveness of Forest Service legalistic enforcement on motorized recreation (cites). To overcome these constraints, individual forests have devised compensatory mechanisms such as: patrolling areas with high traffic and high violations with extra attention (cite); using motorized user groups to concentrate individuals into groups that are more amenable to enforcement (cite); using motorized recreation groups for patrol and enforcement by peers (cite); forming partnerships to

augment budget for formal enforcement (cite); and engaging in collaborative decision-making to mitigate conflict (cite).

One might expect the agency to use recreation enforcement efforts to maximize its budget (O'Toole). Indeed, the last two enforcement strategies listed above involve augmenting the budget for formal enforcement. But if the Forest Service were purely a budget-maximizing agency, as scholars such as Randal O'Toole describe it, the agency would use the money to favor more legalistic enforcement styles over less interventionist.

The forests did not behave as pure budget maximizers. They did increase the number of rangers on patrol, but these rangers continued to express a bias against formal, legalistic enforcement (cites). Hence the cash infusion resulted in an increase in patrols, with a lingering devotion to education rather than formal enforcement (cites). This indicates that Forest Service enforcement efforts are constrained by limited budgets; but enforcement style seems to be driven by cultural norms within the agency.

Conclusion

I found the Forest Service response to changing recreation to be constrained by budget, pulled by shifting alliances among interest groups, and driven by norms. The Forest Service has detected the changes in recreation, and has responded, but not uniformly, not formally, and not according to a clear trajectory. This variability in results contrasts with a long line of scholarly work describing the Forest Service as a closed system driven by hierarchy, professional norms, and pre-formed decisions (cites).

As recreation has become the dominant use and impact on public lands, I expected the Forest Service to shift its focus from provision to management. This did

not happen. While recreation use patterns, interest groups, and the industry have grown, diversified, formalized, and professionalized, Forest Service recreation administration remains decentralized, informal, and variable by Ranger District.

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